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SUBJECT: ASSESSING THE RISK OF SOCIAL UNREST IN RUSSIA

Classified By: Ambassador John Beyrle. Reason: 1.4 (d).

¶11. (C) Summary. The risk of crisis-driven unrest in Russia remains low and is likely to remain so, at least through the summer. Public opinion surveys show an up-tick in dissatisfaction with the country's general direction, but with no indication that the darkening mood signals an increased tendency for protest or other signs of active discontent. Moscow's top sociologists point to deep wellsprings of trust in Putin, successes in the government's efforts to limit layoffs, and the Russian "psyche" of perseverance as explanation for their predictions of relative social stability over the coming months. Some argue with justification that society has yet to feel the full effect of the economic crisis. They predict a moment of truth next fall, when unemployed (or underemployed) Russians return from their summer dachas to face continued deprivations and expected cutbacks in government benefits and support. End Summary.

The Public Mood: Darkening but Not Black

¶12. (C) Russia's top three polling firms offer a consistent picture of a society adjusting to the reality of economic crisis; an increase in general dissatisfaction about the course of events; but general social stability. Ludmilla Presnyakova of the Fund for Public Opinion (FOM) provided data from a February 14-15 survey that showed 58 percent of respondents considered Russia "in crisis" -- up from 31 percent in late January -- and 34 percent expected the crisis to last at least a year. The state-controlled VTsIOM company reported that the number of those who were strongly disturbed by the economic crisis had increased from 40 percent in January to 56 percent in February. Further, VTsIOM surveys found a sharp increase in the number of respondents concerned about unemployment from 25 percent last year to 61 percent in February.

¶13. (C) Already, economic issues are having a negative impact on the political arena. Levada Center polling for February showed a continued downturn in public perceptions about the direction of the country, with 40 percent of respondents saying they considered the country moving in the wrong direction. This compares with only 25 percent in June and 30 percent in November. The economic crisis has also made a slight dent in Putin's personal popularity according to Levada polls, with one-fifth of the population not approving and about 80 percent supporting the Premier. Medvedev's ratings are seen as a derivative of Putin's and have likewise dipped in recent weeks. More telling, public approval of the government (separate from the personalities of the leadership) has fallen to only 54 percent; 43 percent disapproved.

¶14. (C) Taken in perspective, however, Levada data over the eight years of the Putin era shows long-standing Russian skepticism about the government and more measured, though positive, assessments of Putin. For most of the period from 1999 to 2007, the majority of Russians disapproved of their government's work, sometimes with as much as a negative 40 percent approval index (the difference between those who approved vice those who disapproved). Putin's approval index

has enjoyed positive numbers, but varied from less than 40 percent in 2004-2005 to a peak of 80 percent at the time of the war in Georgia. Levada's numbers suggest that the slide in public opinion thus far has merely reflected a decrease from unusually high ratings over the past two years.

¶15. (C) Despite the crisis, FOM surveys found little change in respondents' inclination to take part in protest activities: from 2005 to the present, the number of those who would consider the possibility has been stable at around 30 percent of the population, with fluctuations within the 3 percent margin of error. Even among the unemployed, only 35 percent said they would consider joining a protest action, compared to 28 percent among the population writ large.

Is Russia Revolutionary?

¶16. (C) Many in the political sphere share the sociologists' skepticism about the potential for social unrest over the short to medium term. Economist Evgeniy Gontmakher of the Medvedev-linked Institute of Contemporary Development waved off suggestions that crisis-linked dissatisfaction would lead to social upheaval and a threat to the current order. Despite having published a provocative article hypothesizing a political crisis emerging from the government's failure to deal with a localized protest, he argued to us that Russians remain apolitical, apathetic, and waiting for the government to take action. Further, Russia's immense size and diversity

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are potent roadblocks to the emergence of a nationwide protest movement, leaving Gontmakher ambivalent about the risks that economic crisis in and of itself will engender revolution from below.

¶17. (C) Rostislav Turovksiy of the Center for Political Technologies likewise argued that the current system has deep wellsprings of social support. Echoing Gontmakher, he told us that Russia's populace remains deeply conservative and influenced by the government's propaganda machine, which he claimed would never permit programming that cast blame on government policies for the economic crisis. Andrey Kortunov of the Eurasia Foundation agreed, noting that the Russian leadership retained significant carrots and sticks; culturally, he argued, there would also be an initial willingness to trust the leadership, particularly Putin, by a populace woefully uninformed about international economics.

¶18. (C) A few of our contacts, however, are less sanguine and see the potential for mass social unrest growing, with the risk increasing sharply in the fall. Valeriy Solovei of the Gorbachev Foundation said his main concern was for the middle class, which he considered about 25 percent of the population. The poorer lower class (estimated at 70% of the population) "had nothing to lose" and would survive economic hardship by digging their potatoes and drinking the days away. Oleg Voronin agreed, noting that much of Russian society would spend the summer at the dacha, with only some sporadic protests of office workers (perhaps in Moscow) and some blue collar demonstrations like the coal miners blockade of the main Siberian rail lines. Next fall, however, when the Russian government eventually runs out of cash, economic tensions will rise and give rise to more public displays of discontent.

¶19. (C) Presnyakova sees some logic in the scenario painted by the "pessimists" Solovei and Voronin. She cited research that most Russians have sufficient resources to last four to six months during a crisis, allowing those who have lost their jobs in 2009 to last through summer. Moreover, she said that up to half of all Russian families have a dacha plot where they could grow food supplies for a difficult year. Moreover, in a February FOM poll only 1 percent of respondents cited unemployment (being laid off) as the personal impact of the crisis vice a quarter who suffered pay delays or the 33

percent who cited a reduction in pay or a loss of a bonus. Presnyakova assessed that this reflected the success of government pressure on firms to limit unemployment. As the crisis deepens and the government draws down its reserves, such measures to limit layoffs are likely to diminish sharply. Assessments of how Russian society will react to those coming changes are mixed.

Comment

¶10. (C) It is difficult to predict the course of events in a country as large and differentiated as Russia, especially given the uncertainties of the global economic crisis. We are inclined to the view that Russia will maintain socio-political stability through the summer, albeit with the recognition that localized demonstrations of protest are possible throughout the country, particularly in the "one company towns." Without a viable political alternative and the tandem's control over mass media, the likelihood that economic discontent can evolve into a political movement remains low. However, as we will discuss septel, the greater risk to socio-political stability is that of inter- and intra-elite conflict, in which one or more of the competing clans seeks to leverage public discontent to gain advantage.

End comment.

BEYRLE